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Edward L. Peckham

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A Journey Out West

Early in the morning of June 4, 1857, Edward L. Peckham, a botanist, boarded "the cars" at Providence, Rhode Island, for a "journey out West", having purchased "a through ticket to Iowa City for \$30.55." The route was by way of Niagara Falls, through Canada to Detroit, and thence to "the world renowned Chicago". Apparently the most interesting and surprising event on the way was the sight of many young ladies on the train preparing themselves for a nap "by removing their bonnets, and leaning their heads on the breasts and necks or shoulders of their male companions, whose neighbor arms immediately wound around their waists in close embrace. At times these young girls would arouse and start up, with hair disarranged, gaze about, as if just awakened from sound slumber, and then, with a most endearing sigh," snuggle down again. Mr. Peckham was much puzzled to know the relations of these parties, but observed that the "singular display of affection was practised only by the young and pretty."

Chicago appeared to be "as mean a spot" as he "ever was in, yet." According to his own descrip-

[This account of the trip of E. L. Peckham across Iowa in June, 1857, is based entirely upon his diary as published by The National Historical Society in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. XVII, pp. 225-235, 341-353, Vol. XVIII, pp. 39-50.—THE EDITOR]

tion, the "streets are laid out in squares and are in miserable condition". In many places, the soft clay mud "shakes and trembles as it is passed over. The side walks are very uneven, up hill and down". How people could "navigate this dirty city in a dark night without a broken arm or neck" was a mystery to him. The Chicago River ran "through the center of the city, the south side occupied by the wealthy and enterprising, the north by Germans and Irish and other foreigners." Miserable hovels were "mixed up with the most beautiful and costly stores and edifices," such as he "never saw in any other place. Truly, there is but one Chicago", he wrote. "Michigan avenue is the only street where one can walk in safety".

He found prices high. "Nothing", he recorded, "costs less than 10 cents, called a dime, 5's and 3's used only to make change, and no cents to be seen." On Sunday he had a presentiment that he should avoid eating dinner, but a craving appetite forced him to the table. There he was seated "between two men, who ate with their elbows so extended that they resembled birds on the wing," and he expected "to see them start up and alight on the other side." Indeed, it "was not without some danger" that he managed to get food to his mouth, for he "had several narrow escapes from their huge beams which were playing" about his head.

About ten o'clock that evening, June 7th, he boarded the train for Iowa City and the following

morning found him "dashing rapidly over a level wooded prairie (for the first time seen) interspersed by small farm houses". The train reached the Mississippi River at about eight o'clock and crossed to Davenport "over the famous Rock Island bridge." "Davenport in the State of Iowa," wrote Mr. Peckham, "is a pretty place, and growing at a prodigious rate, far outstripping Rock Island in population and wealth." He did not tarry, however, but continued on his way, "over a rolling prairie, destitute of trees", where he "began to experience feelings of dislike and aversion. The whole prospect was lonely and deserted, and the odor of the flowers truly sickening." Afterward he discovered that the unpleasant smell came from the hound's tongue flowers that covered the prairie in profusion. Being very much interested in observing plant life, he was greatly disappointed in finding only two new species. Both yellow and white star of Bethlehem, the wild geranium, blue eyed grass, yellow lady's slipper, and hound's tongue were particularly common.

"I reached Iowa City, the westernmost point accessible by railroad, about 11 a. m.", he wrote on June 8th. "A little before, a person of very rascally appearance came through the cars, looking up passengers for the West, and I reluctantly gave up my checks and paid \$10, my fare to Des Moines. Hand bills also, in favor of different hotels were scattered about. One of them vaunted itself for having colored waiters. In contrast was one exceed-

ingly modest, pledging satisfaction or no pay. Another, somewhat crusty and sarcastic, saying that if it did not have colored waiters, it could give as good a table as any, and warning the honest traveler against humbug. I patronized neither, but went directly to the stage office outside”.

Stage accommodations were neither very comfortable or congenial. After riding two hours and “gaining only 8 miles” he began to consider his situation, “which was becoming more and more disagreeable.” The coach was crowded. “On my right”, he wrote, “was a stout, broad shouldered, sour looking German, who I afterwards learned was a Lager beer brewer and who was bound to Des Moines to start business. On my left was an equally large man, a farmer and speculator bound to Fort Dodge. On the middle seat, right side, was a slim young man from Boston. In the center, a stout man from some county in New York State, and on his left a tall slim chap from Philadelphia bound to Omaha (pronounced O-mer-hor, accent on first syllable). On the hind seat, left was a boy of about 15 years, son of the commander of Fort Riley, where he was bound, being in the care of the Philadelphia man; in the center was a German with a child 3 years old in his lap, and on the right the German’s wife with a nursing babe. All but one on the middle front seat being thick set men, our legs were awfully crowded. One could not change position without the consent of the whole.”

Just as Mr. Peckham was about to voice his discomfiture and express some decidedly derogatory opinions of all Iowa, the stage stopped to water the horses and as there was a steep hill ahead the driver suggested that the passengers get out and walk a little. "Oh, how welcome was that sound to me, and how eagerly I was to gratify his desire. The sun was very warm, but what of that, my legs were at liberty". He was to have as much walking as he desired before the end of the journey. That night at about ten o'clock the travellers had supper at Marengo.

The trip was resumed, however, immediately afterward. The night was cool and the moon shone brightly until near daybreak. No one but the children slept on account of the necessity of the passengers getting out to walk up the hills, "or rolls as they are called on the prairies." When the day dawned they "were passing over a piece of low ground, covered with rich woods and shrubbery", and the botanist had a good opportunity to look for flowers. It was not long before he discovered the mandrake plant in full bloom which pleased him much, "never having seen it before."

The stage reached Brooklyn in time for breakfast. The town consisted of "half a dozen houses scattered about on top of one of the swells or rollers, with a charming prospect to the left, looking over immense solitudes, but oh! how lonely! and what depressing sensations of stillness." The breakfast

table was crowded with "dishes of pies, cakes and preserves, leaving barely room" for the plates. Mr. Peckham "never saw such a mess." He had to put his cup of coffee on top of a pie and "when the dish of dipped eggs came round, it also was placed on a pie. The fried ham and potatoes were handed around, the whole scene being a jumble of everything, until if a person desired a particular dish, he had to hunt for and dig it out." Although he never ate "the confounded stuff," he "called for cake and preserves, just to make a bother, and see the landlord hunt about."

A few miles beyond Brooklyn a caravan of Mormons was sighted "far away on the horizon" where they resembled "a huge black snake trailing over that interminable sea of grass." They had about a hundred large covered wagons, "each drawn by several yoke of oxen, with some cows following. The wagons were new and painted, the cattle in good condition, and everything betokened a company of some property. There were many young girls, wearing large straw bonnets, with strings attached, by which the front was drawn down, or allowed to fly up over their heads. They were making nosegays as they went along. Some were quite pretty, and evinced some modesty", but the older women exhibited great indignation at being chided for their belief in polygamy. "Of the men, some were indifferent, some smiled and some laughed, but no one said a word." As the stage moved on, "the imi-

grants struck up one of their sacred hymns, their voices being wafted over the plains with a strange and thrilling power."

Grinnell appeared on the right. "Situated on a high swell of the prairie," its white houses were "very conspicuous for several miles, at which distance" it resembled a "town rising from the ocean". Lots were selling at from \$50 to \$300.

Newton, "the capital of Jasper county" was "a place of much pretention, houses widely scattered and some of them really imposing." Although "situated some miles north of the proposed railroad", everyone was insisting that a new line must be built to suit them. The hotel and stage office was "new and barely finished, yet there was an air of cityism about it". Outside in the shade "were lounging a motley set of large whiskered men, with large rim'd straw and fancy colored hats, and visages of bold and speculating stare." The dinner table "was adorned with tumblers of radishes, and dishes of lettuce and sliced boiled eggs, filberts and almonds, articles which cost nothing and which no one eats," and, as was expected, "only a small piece of roast beef or boiled mutton, which was carved at a distant table by a tall man with white apron, were passed round."

After leaving Newton, the route "passed over a long stretch of 'swamp land' with 3 or 4 preemption houses on it. A party of Mormons were also crossing at some distance". That evening they saw the

prairie on fire. "It was, of course, a pretty sight, and resembled very much the engravings" which were to be seen everywhere. The fires were kindled purposely "to find fresh feed, the old stubble being dry and tangled."

About midnight the travellers reached Fort Des Moines. After driving to all of the hotels which were full, they were compelled to "put up at the stage house". Mr. Peckham reflected that he had not had an hour of steady sleep since he left Chicago six days before, and during all of that time had not had his clothes off. He therefore bathed himself well in the common wash room, and changed his shirt and stockings, but could not shave. During the night it rained hard, and the road was in bad condition when the stage started for Council Bluffs the next morning at seven o'clock. "I had heard a good deal about Iowa mud," wrote Mr. Peckham, "and now saw it to my heart's content. It was as thick as dough and greasy at the same time. The horses would slip up and the wheels slide fearfully at every inclination of the road, and whenever we got out to walk it seemed as though we lifted a common sized farm at every step."

After passing through Adel the route again entered upon a rolling prairie. The sun and wind were rapidly drying the track, for road it was not. As Mr. Peckham described it, "when one track is too much worn, a new one is made by its side, as the traces of old ones are distinctly seen. Sometimes a

settler has located and fenced his land directly across the route, and then an entire new one is made, amid the curses of the drivers, who are often obliged to leave the coach and go prospecting."

The land in that section of the State he reported to be "surpassingly rich, and needs no hoeing, raising from 50 to 100 bushels of corn to the acre; the grain being planted and harvested by machinery." In one field, however, he saw men planting corn by hand. The land having been plowed just deep enough to cut the roots and turn the grass under, a man, following the furrow, made cuts in the sod with an axe while another came along, dropped a few kernels in each cut, and covered them with the pressure of his foot.

On the afternoon of June 10th the stage passed through "a perfect sea of beauty. The sky was clear, not a cloud to be seen, a good breeze blowing and no dust. Gently sloping hills, interspersed with bunches of trees, were constantly opening and closing". There was an illusion that the hills were moving aside to allow the coach to pass. The country west of Des Moines was more wooded and the rolls were not so steep as in the eastern part of the State. At five o'clock the stage stopped on a high ridge "with a horizon apparently as level as the ocean; the undulations of the ground hardly discernable afar off, but becoming more distinct as the eye dropped, till the foreground all around appeared cut up into a succession of pleasant valleys, soft as

velvet, all clothed 'in living green'." Over the whole landscape "there breathed the softness and repose of a fairy world, a kind of dreaminess, which was its greatest charm, and which no pen can describe, or pencil imitate. An unearthly stillness reigned everywhere, as if Nature herself had fallen asleep." A house "perched upon the very verge of the horizon, and lit up by the sun's rays like a ship at sea," was the only visible evidence of life "amid those vast and awful solitudes." There they "got a most excellent supper, consisting of curlew, woodcock and stewed prairie chickens, dipped eggs, coffee, tea and warm biscuit."

About midnight they crossed the divide and entered the valley of the Missouri River. Six hours later the coach pulled into Lewis for breakfast. According to Mr. Peckham it was the poorest breakfast he had ever tried to eat—"fried fat pork, hard bread and spring water, the only eatables and drinkables". There was also "a sprinkling of very suspicious looking dishes of preserves and cakes", which he surmised had been "put on daily for a month". Indeed, it was his observation on this trip that "poor fare always accompanied pies, cakes and preserves". He began to dread the sight of them. He noticed, too, that the "houses where this worthless stuff" was served, "or rather exhibited," were "always dirty, and the people low and vulgar." Fifty cents, "the invariable 50 cents," was demanded for every meal.

During the forenoon a party of the famous hand cart Mormons was encountered, "encamped near a rivulet crossed by a bridge of logs and brushwood." If these women, who appeared very dirty and untidy, were a fair sample of the others whom Brigham Young had praised so highly, his tastes certainly differed from Mr. Peckham's.

At noon that day the driver, who was tipsy, "got into a fight with a brother whip and was soundly thrashed, after which, with an awful looking face, he mounted the coach and called upon the passengers to get in; but they wanted their dinner and refused." He then drove off with all the baggage and left his passengers behind. After dinner most of them climbed into a lumber wagon to overtake the coach, which they did after going about eight miles in the jolting wagon with the sun blazing down upon them.

Toward evening of June 11th the stage came in sight of the Bluffs, they "being a heap of dumpy hills". Where the steep sides were destitute of verdure, the solid clay was exposed and looked bright in the sun. "The mighty Missouri was also seen, and on the opposite shore the villages of Belle View and Omaha." The Rhode Islander finally alighted at his destination, "dirty, sweaty and tired".

He was up bright and early the next morning and, having satiated his appetite on some much overdone fried liver, he set out to see the town. He found Council Bluffs "a miserable looking place, with but

one principal street, one-half mile long, between a small stream and gully on the north and a succession of clayey bluffs, well wooded, on the South." The store buildings were low, "principally of one story, the front carried up square to the peak of the roof, and unpainted". On account of the great width of the street, they appeared like huts, though opposite the Pacific House there were several brick structures. Extending six miles to the Missouri River was a flat which, though overflowed in the spring, was "all laid out into house lots". Steamboats were navigating the river but the town was so far away that there was no certainty of passengers being able to meet them. This seemed to be a great disadvantage, but the "Bluffers" contended that the difficulty would be obviated when the railroad came. Council Bluffs was in the throes of a boom: the hotel lobby was crowded with speculators.

While out for a stroll Mr. Peckham came upon a party of Indians. Two men "with feathers in their topknots" and their faces painted "which showed them to be chiefs" passed by absorbed in a monotonous chant and keeping step with the song. Their only covering was a "patch of cloth in front, and a blanket which was originally on their shoulders, but which now had fallen down to the waist and held by one hand". Their "smooth limbs, with not a bone to be seen," shone in the sun. Following them came men, women, boys, and girls, "but of far different appearance, being dirty and wild looking."

Not being able to proceed farther West except on foot or horseback, Mr. Peckham resolved to return, so he secured a seat in the stage and left for the East at about three in the morning of June 13th. The coach was full but there were no ladies. In the middle seat were two brothers from Omaha, in front was a Bohemian from Sioux City, "pronounced Su'", and two young chaps who, as soon as it was light, began to play euchre, "a game universally in vogue 'out West'." In the rear was a "young man from Fort Des Moines who had been prospecting near Spirit Lake and knew all about the Indian atrocities committed there", and also two queer individuals, one of whom, a fussy gentleman, turned out to be the Governor of South Carolina.

After passing Lewis, where they had as bad a dinner as the breakfast there a few days before, the stage took a different route to Des Moines. A bounteous supper, consisting of "fried veal, fried ham, fried and mashed potatoes, boiled and dipped eggs, warm biscuit, tea and coffee", was obtained at a log house eighty miles from Council Bluffs where they arrived at about midnight. Through inky darkness, relieved at frequent intervals by flashes of dazzling lightning, the stage proceeded. "It seemed as if the heavens were cracking and bursting to pieces, and that darkness itself had caught fire and exploded. Awful sight." The motion of the coach gave the impression of "riding over some fiery abyss" and the feeling "that the inhabitants of the lower regions

had risen en masse, and were using all their powers to encompass" the destruction of the travellers. Yet through it all "there was no thunder, but everything" was "as silent as the grave."

Sunday seems to have been spent in Des Moines, for on Monday morning Mr. Peckham was again on his way and breakfasted at Keiths. His night's rest had given him an appetite worthy of the occasion and never more cheerfully did he "fork over the accustomed fee of 50 cents". When he came out of the house he found a red headed chap occupying his seat in the coach. "I came up and told Mr. Redhead that he had got my seat and must abandon it; he refused. I was about to use force, when he yielded." But a tall individual who had climbed into the center seat remained there, "provokingly sullen and obstinate". He "muttered that he had paid his fare, and should keep where he was, and it was not till the Brothers had grabbed him" that he gave in, growling that "if it rained, he guessed he would be inside somewhere. But the occupants guessed he wouldn't, and united in a determination to keep him out by force if he attempted it, but he did not, notwithstanding there were a few slight showers."

At "the ambitious city of Newton" the hotel "ceremonies had advanced a peg or two, soup being now passed round as the first course. A hundred guests and only 3 servants, rather a poor look. So I went into some baked beans, and bread and butter, and advised our lady voyager, who sat on my right,

to do the same. So by the time that soup was over, and the landlord, who had taken his stand in the farthest corner of the hall, had put on his white apron and commenced carving the beef and lamb, I was tolerably full and could hear the cry of 'Stage ready' without trembling."

From Newton the route lay through Westfield, Montezuma, and Millersburg to Iowa City. According to some handbills thrust inside the coach, Westfield was a place unusually "interesting to those seeking locations!"

WESTFIELD

Is a new Town situated in the Western part of Poweshiek County, 70 miles from Iowa City; 16 from Montezuma, 16 from Newton; 35 from Oskaloosa, and 30 from Marietta. It is located in a fertile and arable section of the country, which everyone will testify to who have been accustomed to reap the rich reward of a plentiful harvest, with a small amount of labor. Added to the above, it is in the center of a beautiful grove of excellent timber for this part of the country, containing about three thousand acres.

Roads center at this place from almost every direction. The old State road from Iowa City to Newton, Fort Des Moines and Council Bluff passes through, with its daily line of stages; also roads connecting Montezuma with Newton, Oskaloosa with Marietta, Pella with Grinnell, etc.

Mill privileges are in abundance. We have one steam sawmill in our place, one in two miles, another in four; and one steam Flouring mill in five miles.

In the Mechanical line, we have one Blacksmith shop, with two hands employed; two Wagon-makers, and several

Carpenters. A Plasterer and Shoemaker would find it to their advantage to locate here.

We have one Tavern, and need another. One Bakery; and two Dry Goods and Grocery Stores.

We intend to educate our children notwithstanding our county is new. We have one School now in successful operation, and the material partly ready for building a school house twenty-two by twenty-four, and intend to have it ready for a Fall School.

Prairie land ranges from five to fifteen dollars per acre; timber land from twenty to fifty; and improved farms can be purchased at from fifteen to twenty-five dollars per acre. There is, perhaps, but few places in Iowa where farming pays better than on this line of road. The travel is so extensive that it consumes all the surplus that farmers can raise, at high prices and ready pay.

Lumber is worth two dollars and fifty cents per hundred.

The religious interests of the place have their average representation for the number of its inhabitants — amounting to between fifty and sixty — consisting of United Brethren, Christians, Methodists and Quakers.

Lots can be purchased at prices ranging from twelve to forty dollars.

Our Post Office address is "Sugar Grove, Poweshiek County Iowa;" our post office having been established previous to the location of our town.

For further particulars, address the proprietors of the town, viz: Messrs. Robert Golden, Jesse H. Cook, N. J. Latimer and J. Simpson.

Westfield, June 8, 1857.

The casual traveller, however, did not share the enthusiasm of the town proprietors. To be sure the

village was located in a "beautiful grove of large trees", and, though there was plenty of prairie all around, "these priceless trees" were cut down, "and corner lots laid out amid their stumps and young shoots." The town consisted of about six buildings, and around the hotel "were lounging the same number of dirty and ignorant looking men. Where their boasted 60 inhabitants were, was a mystery".

The remainder of the stage journey was made under very adverse conditions. The nights were dark and stormy, while the road was next to impassable. Though the drivers proceeded reluctantly, the passengers welcomed the command of the stage manager to "put 'em through anyhow". And so it was at 10 P. M. on the sixteenth of June, just eight days since he had boarded the stage for Council Bluffs, that Mr. Peckham returned again to Iowa City. Having spent the night on a cot in the parlor of the Clinton House, the hotel being overflowed with guests, he arose early the next morning, had his shoes polished, ate a scanty breakfast, "and then hurried to the cars". The engine broke down and it was not until nearly noon that he reached Davenport. Two days later he was at home once more in Providence.